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ABSTRACT

Counseling is one of the processes through which men and women may learn to take increasing responsibility for their self-creation as they apply what they learn in classrooms and elsewhere to their life-planning. Counseling is a learning process. Each person is in the process of creating his or her own life; this process will be enhanced by high quality learning experiences which encourage probing of ultimate questions and concentration on what really matters. In counseling sessions the counselor guides the counselee through a process of self- and social criticism for the purposes of problem solving, decision making, goal setting, and/or conflict resolution. Counseling is a critical thinking activity; the counselor is a facilitator of learning. Learning is facilitated by different people in different settings, by instructors in classrooms and by counselors in counseling sessions. The traditional community college division into instructional and student services makes no sense in this formulation. More and more people are championing critical thinking; ideally this critical thinking should include self-criticism. (ABL)

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Counseling As A Critical Thinking Activity
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I would like to begin by making some remarks so that you will know what my frame of reference is regarding education in general and counseling in particular.

Then I would like to develop my idea of counseling as a critical-thinking activity, including two examples of real-life counseling sessions which illustrate this thesis.

I think of formal education as one of the processes--I say one of deliberately because I think that some educators forget that people learn a great deal about life outside of the formal educational system--it is one of the processes which contribute to men and women learning more about themselves and their natural and social environment; learning how to learn; forming and examining theirs and others' beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes; developing personal world views or philosophies of life; and acquiring skills and knowledge for rich living, in and out of the workplace; or, as Charlie Collins, Dean Emeritus of Los Medanos College has put it more poetically and with a dash of moral philosophy: "The purpose of education is to help each man experience more fully, live more broadly, perceive more keenly, and feel more deeply in order to gain self-fulfillment and the wisdom to see that his own fulfillment is inextricably tied to the general welfare." (This was written in 1969 in Ceylon before it became Sri Lanka and it was still traditional to say, "each man.")

I think of counseling as one of the processes through which men and women may learn to take increasing responsibility for their self-creation as they apply what

they learn in classrooms and elsewhere to their life-planning, which involves making decisions, identifying and solving problems, clarifying values, setting goals, thinking critically, and coping with life's challenges pro-actively. Thus, counseling is, no less than classroom instruction, a learning process.

Often in any discussion of counseling the matter of the difference, if any, between counseling and psychotherapy arises. Practitioners have many agreements and disagreements on the issue. Milton Hahn has written that among the agreements are "(1) that counseling and psychotherapy cannot be distinguished clearly, (2) that counselors practice what psychotherapists consider psychotherapy, (3) that psychotherapists practice what counselors consider to be counseling, and (4) that despite the above they are different." H. J. Eysenck has defined psychotherapy as "an unidentified technique applied to unspecified problems with unpredictable outcomes. For this technique we recommend rigorous training." For our purposes here, suffice it to say that counseling and psychotherapy are on a continuum with much overlap--so much overlap, in the view of a community mental health psychiatrist, who was a consultant to our counseling department in the days of the golden cornucopia, that he told us that the only thing that he could do with patients that we couldn't (in addition to calling them patients) was to prescribe medicine.

I have had the idea that my emphasis on counseling as primarily a learning process was somewhat unusual in guidance circles, since mainly I have encountered approaches which tended to stress such aspects as choice-making, role-clarification, or personality development. I was, therefore, somewhat surprised to find that 20 years ago Steffre and Grant wrote in Theories of Counseling: "...most theorists in the field now would agree that counseling is a learning process, although they might have some sharp differences as to what facilitates learning and how learning occurs" (they even used my favorite phrase "facilitates learning" 20 years ago). Steffre and Grant even quote a 30 year old learning-oriented, somewhat wordy, but

comprehensive definition of counseling by a theorist named J. W. Gustad: "...counseling is a learning-oriented process, carried on in a simple one-to-one social environment, in which a counselor, professionally competent in relevant psychological skills and knowledge, seeks to assist the client by methods appropriate to the latter's needs and within the context of the total personnel program, to learn more about himself, to learn how to put such understanding into effect in relation to more clearly perceived, realistically defined goals to the end that the client may become a happier and more productive member of society." In any case, I think that the concept of counseling as a learning process is understressed today, and why I make such a point of this will be clear in a few minutes.

A central concept in my definitions of counseling and education is that of self-creation. That is how I see each of our life processes: each of us is in the process of creating his or her own life. This is done, of course, within a certain context: genetic, social, and, if you will, divine or transcendent. Our self-creation will be enhanced by high quality learning experiences which encourage us to probe ultimate questions, to concentrate on what really matters (after we figure out what really matters!). I think that educators could contribute more valuably to this process if <u>we</u> would break out of our narrow "disciplines"--our specialities within specialities--and talk with each other and our students about what really matters. If we did we might drastically revise the curriculum. Thus, all that we do with students, in and out of the classroom, should be directed primarily to enabling them to become increasingly self-directed and self-fulfilled. And because we should be concerned about the <u>quality</u> of their direction and fulfillment, I agree with Professor Robert Bellahof of UC Berkeley that our campuses need an infusion of good old 19th Century "moral philosophy." How extraordinary and encouraging it is that here at Sonoma State University we have a Center for Critical Thinking <u>and</u> Moral Critique!

In my counseling sessions with students and, occasionally, staff members, I attempt to facilitate their self-direction and self-creation, and in so doing questions of value are often raised.

In counseling sessions the counselor guides the counselee through a process of self- and social-criticism for the purpose of problem-solving, decision-making, goal-setting, and/or conflict-resolution. Whether the topic is the selection of a major or coping with a serious personal or interpersonal predicament, the process is essentially the same, differing only in intensity. Emotions may need to be expressed, and in movement toward resolution or synthesis, reasoning needs to be clear and accurate, values need to be clarified, assumptions examined, alternatives explored, multi-viewpoints considered, and judgments formulated.

Thus, counseling is a critical-thinking activity, and the counselor is, no less than the instructor, a facilitator of learning. The content is the process and the circumstances of the counselee's life.

Using one of the leading texts in the field of critical-thinking instruction, Vincent Ruggiero's Beyond Feeling: A Guide to Critical Thinking, as a standard, it is not an exaggeration to say that every single critical-thinking technique and disposition is used by the counselor in one way or another and at one time or another, including involvement with:

self-image and self-knowlege
cognitive styles of learning
pursuit of truth
knowing/assuming/guessing/speculating
informed versus uninformed opinion
ethnocentrism
resistance to change
conformity
face-saving
stereotyping
faulty common sense
oversimplification
hasty conclusions
unwarranted assumptions
and so on.

Let me illustrate this with two brief descriptions of situations which have arisen recently in counseling sessions. Please keep in mind that each of these excerpts occurred within a broader context of discussion which I am not including.

A student told me, with no spark of enthusiasm, that he had come to see me for help in selecting a good major for the career he had selected. I asked him what career he had selected. His response was "medicine--SIGH!" My response was, "That was quite a sigh," and that's all it took for the floodgates to open. It became quickly clear to me that this was a classic case of a person in turmoil because he was intending to direct his life in reaction to the expectations of an unfilled other person--such a classical case, in fact, that the unfulfilled other was a father who had not made it in medical school and had become a biology teacher--such a classical case that you may think that I made it up for the purposes of this illustration, but, as Benny Hill would say, "It's true, I tell you!" This was not at all clear to the student at the outset of our discussion. He appeared to have very little insight into the extent to which he was fulfilling some else's dreams. The half-hour session ended with his saying that he would think things over and return. He did return a few days later and, without any reference to the previous session, and without sighing, he asked me what the prep-for-major courses for music were at SDSU and what certain job opportunities in music looked like. I provided that information and he left. Of course, for all I know, he may indeed have decided to pursue a career in medicine, since one of the things I had told him was that, as long as one has the requisite science and math courses, one major is as good as another for pre-med. In the first session the counselee mainly did self-examination, with my guiding, of his motives for career-choice; in between sessions he apparently did more soul-searching and alternatives-exploration; and in the second session he sought and received information about circumstances in the world of academe and music on the basis of which he made certain decisions, however tentative, and thus he pursued his self-creation.

Incidentally, this example illustrates also how cautious we must be in the use of paraprofessionals in counseling centers. The potential value of students talking with professional counselors, whenever possible, should not be underestimated. I

can easily envisage this scenario: the student tells the paraprofessional who is screening as to who needs an appointment with a counselor, that he wants to know what would be a good major for pre-med; the paraprofessional answers that any major is acceptable as long as he also has the requisite math and science courses; since the student has mentioned UCSD, he leaves with the sheet listing UCSD's pre-med requirements and with his sigh, and the floodgates still closed; and who knows what course his self-creation might have taken consequently.

A young woman asked for information about no- or low-cost alcohol treatment programs in the community. Naturally I started in on AA. Before long she stopped me, obviously disturbed, saying that it would have to be a program other than AA. I got a resource book and we started looking over other possibilties, but I knew that I wanted to get back to her reaons for not considering AA. To make a long story short, it came out that her sister had gone through AA and had been sober for three years, but since she and her sister had never gotten along and since her sister was pompous and self-righteous about her recovery, the counselee wanted no part of a group in which her sister had participated, however successfully. Following our discussion she left with, I think, some awareness of how her behavior was reactive to the sister; how she was denying herself probably the best, and certainly the cheapest, resource in the community because of this reaction. She left also with a better understanding about AA philosophy and practice, and with a telephone number. She seemed especially pleased to learn that there are dozens of AA meetings throughout the greater San Diego area on all days and at all hours so that, if it made her more comfortable while she was working on becoming more pro-active, she could avoid the group that her sister attended.

Isn't this examination of one's own biases, attitudes, beliefs, "facts," et cetera; this attempt to enter into the perspective of the father and the sister; and this evaluation of circumstances in the outer world--that is, isn't this self- and social-criticism critical thinking--and strong-sense to boot?

I would like to return to my position that the counselor no less than the instructor is a facilitator of learning. What we are all about in education is learning, even though some seem to confuse one means, instruction, with the end, learning. Learning is facilitated by different people in different settings--by student affairs directors in student government meetings, by librarians in libraries, by counselors in counseling centers by instructors in classrooms--but all are facilitators of learning.

Within this formulation, the traditional community college division of the house into instructional services and student services makes no sense, particularly in regard to counselors. What counselors do with students is, in my view, so different in depth and breadth from what staff members do with students in such offices as admissions and financial aids, that lumping that all together under student services, or worse, support services, is inappropriate. I have never, incidentally, thought of my work with students as primarily designed to support anyone else's work with students, except in the sense that we are all supportive of one another. If the house has to be divided at all for administrative purposes, how about Educational Services (including instructors, librarians, and counselors) and Matriculation Services. This has implications for legislation on matriculation that will emerge from the work of the Master Plan Review Commission and the Joint Legislative Committee. If any of you are interested in this topic, we can pursue it during discussion.

Let me close with a thought about Richard Paul's crucial strong-sense/weak-sense formulation. It is encouraging that more and more people in diverse settings are championing the cause of critical thinking, but almost always they have weak-sense in mind. Has the term and its essence been co-opted? The ideal is that critical thinking, by definition, includes self-criticism: the evaluation of one's own positions, biases, attitudes, and beliefs, however sacred. Since it's no doubt too late to reserve the term critical thinking for this approach and demand that

another name be used for thinking which is not self-critical, the best we can do is to insist everywhere that we have any influence that if critical thinking is the objective, then introspection is an essential ingredient.

Since critical thinking has some of its roots in formal logic, let me end with a syllogism. Valid or invalid:

Being self- and socio-critical is essential to leading the examined life;

Self- and socio-criticism is the essence of critical thinking;

Therefore, critical thinking is essential to leading the examined life.

Thank you.

Discussion.

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